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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2543  
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE  
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK IMMEDIATE 3022  
RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002621

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL RP TH

SUBJECT: CABINET OFFICIALS DISTURBED BY THAI UPHEAVAL, BUT  
DON'T SEE PHILIPPINES FOLLOWING SUIT

REF: MANILA 2592: ARMED FORCES CHIEF ON PEACE AND  
SECURITY

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In conversations with the Ambassador, President Arroyo's most senior advisors voiced deep dismay at the current political turmoil in Thailand, but believed that the Philippines' lively democracy would stay within constitutional bounds. Defense Secretary Teodoro privately criticized the Thai Army chief's call for the Prime Minister to step down, and praised the refusal of senior Philippine military officers to get drawn into political maneuverings here. He voiced some concern the Thai protests could embolden anti-government groups here, but Foreign Secretary Romulo and others were confident that Manila would not see the kind of large-scale protests that have rocked Bangkok. Romulo also noted that ASEAN members might have to reconsider whether to hold their upcoming summit in Thailand, and Teodoro suggested that the Thai Army chief might not be invited to a planned regional defense chiefs event here. End summary.

"OUTRAGEOUS" MILITARY INTERFERENCE

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¶2. (C) During a conversation with the Ambassador November 27, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro characterized the current political situation in Thailand as "very troubling" and said the Philippine government was watching developments closely. Teodoro labeled as "outrageous" Thai Army chief Anupong Paojinda's call for the Prime Minister to step down and said he was considering canceling the general's participation in an upcoming meeting for ASEAN army chiefs hosted by the Philippines. He explained that the Department of Foreign Affairs had publicly urged Filipinos to avoid travel to Thailand and that the Philippine government was working hard to get some 800 citizens stranded at the Bangkok airport out of Thailand. He noted that a Philippine defense under secretary had been stranded as well, and only got out via Thai military C-130 to Singapore.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador commented to Teodoro that he should be pleased with the lack of political involvement on the part of the Philippine military during recent impeachment maneuverings against President Arroyo, to which Teodoro responded that indeed, the Philippine Armed Forces had shown a high degree of professionalism in the face of political pressure. Privately, however, Teodoro confided to the Ambassador that he was concerned that opportunists in the Philippines might be emboldened by the Thai protesters' actions and call for massive street protests before Christmas to oust President Arroyo.

APPALLING GOVERNMENT PARALYSIS

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¶4. (C) In a private breakfast with the Ambassador Nov. 28, Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo said he was "appalled" by the Thai government's paralysis and wondered why the King had not intervened to resolve the political impasse. Romulo remarked that while Philippine politics was messy, opposition politicians operated within the bounds of the law and conducted peaceful and orderly protests that did not disrupt commercial and civilian life. Romulo stressed his pride in the Philippine military for their discipline in remaining out of politics, as compared to the Thai military. On ASEAN issues regarding Thailand, Romulo said that the unrest in Thailand had led ASEAN ministers to discuss among themselves the practicality of having their summit in Thailand, but that no decision had been made yet.

ARMY CHIEF PLEDGES CONTINUED NONPOLITICAL STANCE

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¶5. (C) The Philippine's top military officer publicly echoed Teodoro's and Romulo's sentiments. Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Alexander Yano told the press Nov. 27 that Filipino soldiers would not mimic their Thai counterparts in calling for a change in government. During an earlier breakfast with the Ambassador Nov. 19 (reftel), General Yano noted to the Ambassador that there had not been any recent overt attempts by the opposition to co-opt the Philippine military leadership, though he was frequently queried by key figures on the military's stance regarding Philippine presidential politics. Stressing that this was a nuisance more than a serious problem, Yano emphasized to the Ambassador that the military was avoiding such distractions, but that they underscored the persistent desire of a minority

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to involve the armed forces in the political process.

CHANGED ENVIRONMENT

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¶6. (C) Other key lieutenants of President Arroyo sought to alleviate any concern that a Thai-style upheaval could hit the Philippines. National Security Advisor Norberto Gonzales told the press Nov. 27 that protests similar to the on-going demonstrations in Thailand will not occur against President Arroyo, and stated his belief that Arroyo would finish out her term, scheduled to end in 2010. Gonzales made the statement one day after the Philippine House of Representatives juked the fourth and latest impeachment attempt against President Arroyo. And in a further sign of how Philippine politics has evolved in recent years, Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile and Senator Gregorio Honasan, who had leading military roles in the ouster of former President Marcos in 1986 and attempted coups against President Aquino in the late 80's, publicly downplayed speculation that another coup could happen in the Philippines.

JONES